



## Paper or Plastic? That'll Cost You a Quarter.

Posted by [Pierluigi Oliverio](#) on Monday, January 12, 2009

Last week, I attended in the Santa Clara County Cities Association. This association has a representative from every city in Santa Clara County. In my view, a good portion of the time is spent uniting all the cities to advocate state and federal policy- makers on policies or bills that help Santa Clara county cities. At this meeting, the Recycling and Waste Reduction Commission (RWRC) of Santa Clara County presented the concept of banning plastic bags. The idea is to come up with a policy that could be adopted uniformly through the entire county. But each city would have to adopt and implement the policy. The hope is that each city would adopt it as is or with limited changes, so that the entire county would be on the same page by April 22nd of this year (Earth Day).

The representative from Monte Sereno said that city's council is in favor of it, but later confessed that they actually don't have commercial stores that would be effected...funny.

So, the problem as you many know, is that plastic bags litter the environment, clog drains, take centuries to decompose and for the most part cannot be recycled. Also, these single-use bags, plastic or paper, require higher consumption of natural resources, generate greenhouse gases, and use petroleum which we as a country typically import from countries that we don't always trust.

After stakeholder input was completed, the RWRC came up with the idea that both paper and plastic bags would no longer be free. That by charging for single-use bags we would modify the behavior of consumers to instead use a reusable bag. The thought is that under this new policy, if you were to go to a grocery store or retail store and did not have your reusable hemp bag, then you would pay 25 cents for a plastic or paper bag. If you were doing a big shopping spree at the grocery store and needed 12 bags you would only have to pay for the first eight for a maximum charge of \$2 per visit. The 25 cents would be split between the store and the government. The store would get five cents and the county or the city would get 20 cents. The 20 cents would go toward enforcement of the new policy. It is not clear whether

the county would enforce the implementation or the city. Who do you think would be more or less effective to oversee this new policy, if adopted—cities or the county? (Personally, I picture Boss Hogg of the show Dukes of Hazzard doing the enforcement).

The 25 cents would essentially be a fee passed on to the consumer which could only be spent on enforcement of the policy since it is a fee and not a general-purpose tax. The average consumer uses 300 bags a year which would be \$75. Would \$75 change your behavior? Would you carry a large over sized IKEA like bag with you to Valley Fair or Oakridge?

Exemptions would be on produce/fish/poultry/beef or take-out food. Also, people on welfare would be exempt from paying. I don't remember ever getting a bag at Costco; they usually just stack everything in the cart or some random odd-shaped cardboard box and then I shove the items all over the car and do 20 trips back and forth between my car and my kitchen.

From my perspective, there is value in a plastic bag after you purchase something. I just used plastic bags to put away all my Christmas lights. I also use them to pick up dog poo. Actually, I keep a couple bags in my car so when I see an irresponsible dog owner who lets their dog poop on someones yard without cleaning it up I pull up and ask them if they need a bag for the gift they just left the resident. So far they all say yes.

My Dad, who grew up during the depression, loves plastic bags to organize all his clutter that he keeps because he does not like to throw things away (you know the type). I can imagine my Dad in the future at the Safeway parking lot selling his extra plastic bags out of his trunk for 10 cents each.

Charging for bags will not end litter. The only way to solve litter is by having Singapore-style laws where the penalties are high enough to discourage deviant behavior even when no one is looking. In the end, if I find value in the plastic bag then I am OK with paying for it. What about you? We are still in the outreach phase so what do you think?

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